

A SPIRITUAL GIANT IN AN AGE OF DWARFED TERRESTRIAL ASPIRATIONS

SHAYKH HAMZA YUSUF pays tribute to the man who led his heart to Islam.

I remember purchasing a small metaphysical treatise by an author with a foreign name way back in 1976 as I was browsing the shelves in a small spiritual bookstore located amidst a beautiful garden in Ojai, California. The title was *The Book of Certainty: The Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Vision and Gnosis*, and the author was Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din. At the time, I knew nothing of Islam, let alone who the author was, yet the title intrigued me. It was, in essence, what I was searching for - certainty.

I read as much of the book as I could but recall not understanding very much. It quoted extensively from the Quran and offered highly esoteric commentaries in a language quite foreign to me. I set it aside, but my curiosity had been piqued that shortly thereafter, in a life-altering transaction, I purchased a Quran and began to read a very personal revelation that would compel me to convert to the religion of Islam.

After more than a decade abroad seeking sacred knowledge, I returned to the United States and was soon teaching courses on Islam. Not long after I was asked to teach a series of lectures based upon the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him. I agreed but needed a text in English for the students. I began looking for a sound biography of the Prophet that was written in an English style that did justice to the story.

Surprisingly, for a man who the American historian Michael Hart ranked the single most influential human being who every lived, hardly anything serious biographical literature was available other than poorly written works published in far-off places or polemics and misrepresentations. I was somewhat despondent and then I discovered the finely produced *Muhammad: his life based on the earliest sources*, by Dr Martin Lings. I knew who he was because I had been warned that I should be careful when reading his books. What I didn't know at the time was that Dr. Martin Lings and Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din, the man whose book led me to the Quran, were one and the same person. Nevertheless, I decided to read the book and assess it for myself.

I was quickly immersed in a story told by a master storyteller whose English oft-times sang and always soared. The Prophet's life was masterfully narrated through a series of short chapters in a prose as engaging and poetic as Lytton Strachey's in *Eminent Victorians*, only the subject matter was not on an eminent Victorian but rather written by one who appeared to be. My father, a fine critic of English literature, remarked after reading it that unfortunately the prejudice Westerners have for the topic has prevented it from being recognised as one of the great biographies of the English language.





Previous page: Fuad Nahdi, Dr Martin Lings and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf at the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on 24th November 2004. Above left: At the Taj Mahal in 1990. Dr Lings would regularly tour Egypt, Malaysia, India, Pakistan and other countries where he would visit his students who were too poor to journey to England. Above and page 58: On a trip to Egypt in the 1990s.

When we arrived at Dr. Lings' humble residence in Kent, we entered into a sparse living room; it had subtle but palpable serenity commonly experienced by those who visit people of copious prayer and invocation. I was struck by the surroundings, the absence of furniture in the room and the simple straw matting on the English cottage floor.

The book had such a profound impact on my life that I adopted it for the class I was about to teach. In preparation I read it several times, making extensive notes and checked references to the original sources quite often. I was astounded at the historical accuracy of the text and the providential care so evident in the author's choice of versions as well as the underlying structure of the story as he chose to tell it. He followed closely the work of Ibn Hisham but augmented it with several other historical sources.

For those who attended the class, it will be an indelible experience marked by the grace that pervaded it as well as tears that flowed frequently. I attribute this to the topic of the course but also to the wonderful presentation of the material in Dr. Lings' book. The lectures were later produced as a tape set and was widely appreciated throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and even as far away as Pakistan and Malaysia.

I later came into contact Dr. Lings' students in the UK who were pleased with the set and suggested that I meet him. I complied, and on my first visit I was accompanied by the well-known Muslim photographer, Sidi Abdal Adheem Sanders, who has made it his mission in life to photograph as many righteous people throughout the world as possible.

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A few minutes later, Dr. Lings, well over ninety years of age, entered the room slowly yet gracefully, greeted us, and asked us to sit down. He sat on a small alcove that looked out upon a stunning English garden that I later learned was of his own tending and in which he is now buried. I spoke of how much his book had influenced me and told him that I had used it as a basis for my class. He thanked me and yet humbly protested that he had never intended to do something as presumptuous as write the Prophet's biography - peace be upon him, but having been prevailed upon by others finally relented. When I told him of my father's remark, he replied that of the four levels of English, he had written the work at the highest one - far from a boast it was uttered as simple statement of fact from a man who had a degree in medieval English from Oxford, taught Shakespeare at university for twenty years, and wrote poetry like John Donne!

I then requested a belated permission to teach the book should I do so again in the future. He graciously complied and signed the copy I had brought with me. He began to discuss our present age and how unfortunate it is that people are severed from their spiritual roots. He mentioned how when he had been a child in England, prayer was the lifeblood of the family, and he lamented that many people in England no longer prayed nor even taught their children to do so. He remarked that many people had forgotten that although God is merciful, He nonetheless has a wrathful side and that when people did not actively work to purify themselves, great tribulations came upon them as a result. It seemed, to him, that the world was on the brink of some great purification.

After the meeting, both Sidi Abdal Adheem and I agreed that the presence of the man was not dissimilar to that of some of the righteous men we were fortunate enough to have met in

the East. In South Asian culture such a state and the people who posses it are called *hazrat*, derived from the Arabic word for 'presence,' which results from a person's wakefulness achieved through constant remembrance of God.

Another quality that impacted both of us was the utter humility he displayed that was as genuine as the sheepskin rugs he offered us to sit upon. What struck me more than anything else was that during the entire conversation he almost always prefaced his remarks or followed them with a verse from the Quran, which he quoted with an eloquent Arabic accent. His slow and deliberate method of speaking instilled in the listener an anticipation of what was to come as well as a sense that the speaker was acutely aware of the angelic scribes who were anticipating and recording the conversation.

I was happy that I had the good fortune to meet such a man; but lamented that I had never bothered to visit him before. In the weeks that followed, several things that he had mentioned in our hour-long conversation returned to occupy my thoughts, particularly some insights into the Quran that he had brought to my attention. I vowed that if I were in England again, I would try to visit him once more.

Our next meeting came shortly after the first. This time though I was in the company of Habib 'Ali al-Jifry, the well-known scholar and inviter to Islam from Yemen, and a small group of friends. I had known Habib 'Ali for several years and he had desired to see Dr. Lings after being told of him by Fuad Nahdi, publisher of *Q-News*. Habib 'Ali has an immense respect for elders and especially for those who have served the Prophet in some way. When he heard of the excellent book Dr. Lings had penned and his love for the Prophet, he desired to visit him with us.

The day that we arrived at the doorsteps of Dr. Lings' abode it was overcast and the atmosphere had an English wetness about it. This time, the good doctor welcomed us at the door and I attributed this to Dr. Lings impeccable comportment towards a direct descendent of the Prophet, and God knows best. He led us to the same room as before and invited us to sit. Habib 'Ali sat closest to Dr. Lings, and I sat next to Habib 'Ali.

Before speaking, Dr. Lings apologised to us and explained that, while during his time in Egypt, he had become quite fluent in Arabic, unfortunately since his return to England his spoken Arabic had been neglected and become quite rusty from lack of use but that he would do his best. To our surprise, he began to speak a very mellifluous classical Arabic that impressed both Habib 'Ali and me.

Someone who was present brought up a thorny issue that was the source of the many warnings I had received about Dr. Lings' books. The subject had to do with the belief that the world's great religious traditions - Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism - teach essentially the same perennial truths as Islam does and therefore, like Islam, they each retain a validity of practice to this day. The subject is referred to in modern discourse as 'Perennialism.'

Dr. Lings responded to the question with comments that were highly philosophical. He reasoned that it is God's Wisdom and His Will to keep these spiritual traditions alive until the present day. Dr. Lings substantiated his arguments with verses from the Quran. It was evident to me that the outward and apparent meaning of the verses he cited affirmed what he said but his interpretation was certainly not the classical view of the verses as understood by the accepted exegetes of the Quran throughout Islam's history.

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Even so, both Habib 'Ali and I felt that, while Dr. Lings' view on the subject was not mainstream, it was not a complete rejection of the classical Islamic position which holds that previous religious dispensations were abrogated by the final message of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and certainly his own conversion to Islam indicated that fact. What we heard instead was a rather novel interpretation based upon Dr. Lings' own thought and reading of sacred traditions that he had most likely inherited from his teachers. It is in fact a position entertained by the late Fazlur Rahman in his book, *Major Themes of The Qur'an*.

The underlying justification for this approach is an attempt to reconcile the scriptural antinomy of an all-merciful deity who displays wrath, in which a focus on God's overriding mercy mentioned in the Quran extenuates those scriptural statements that stress eternal wrath. An abstruse issue that several classical scholars wrestled with including Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah, Imam Al-Ghazzali and Shaykh Ibn 'Arabi al-Hatimi.

I interjected at one point and mentioned Imam al-Ghazzali's orthodox and yet satisfying view presented in his intriguing *Faisal al-tafriqah* that suggests that the majority of Christians and Jews and even peoples of other faiths and creeds could ultimately gain salvation since they did not reject a true and compelling presentation of Islam.

What they rejected rather was the tragic misrepresentation through distortion or the bad behavior of those who claimed to follow the true teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, according to Imam al-Ghazzali, this allowed for God's ultimate forgiveness for the masses of humanity.

Both Habib 'Ali and I felt that Dr. Lings was most certainly a devout and pious Muslim, fully committed to the teaching of the Prophet and one who rooted his thought and practice in the Quran despite our clear differences with him on the subject of perennialism. I believe that his spiritual presence was a cogent argument for his practice and commitment.

An aspect of Islam that many modern Muslims fail to recognise is the vast diversity of opinion that has accumulated over the centuries of Islamic history, much of it rooted in what is known as *ta'wil* (interpretation). Indeed, throughout Islam's life of over fourteen hundred years, scholars have sought as many interpretive excuses as possible for heterodox utterances before attacking someone or worse still condemning such people of heresy.

I am reminded of Imam Abu Hasan's statement recorded by Imam Dhahabi in Siyar A'lam an-Nubala: "We do not

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anathematise anyone from the community of believers; rather, these are semantic issues upon whose meanings we differ." Imam Dhahabi remarks that this was also the position of his own teacher Ibn Taymiyyah towards the end of his life, when he said, "We do not anathematise anyone who guards his wudu, as the Prophet said, 'Only a believer guards his *wudu*.'"

Another point less frequently made is that our Prophet himself informed us that the guidance of the later peoples would not be the same guidance of that of the earlier community, and yet it will be good. According to a sound *hadith* narrated by Imam al-Bukhari, Hudhaifah relates:

"People were asking the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, about good, and I decided to ask about evil out of fear that it might affect me. So I said, 'O Messenger of God, we were in ignorance and spiritual privation, and then God brought us all of this good. Is there any evil after this good?'

The Prophet replied, 'Yes!'

I then asked, 'Is there good after that evil?'

He said, 'Yes but it will contain cloudiness!'

'What is its cloudiness?' I asked.

He replied, 'A people who guide by other than my guidance; some things from them you recognise and others you reject …'"

In this hadith the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, is telling us that people will come later who are good but their teaching will have alien elements not contained in the original purity of the Prophet's teaching to such an extent that it will not be recognisable to the early community and thus, rightfully rejected. And yet he, peace be upon him, called such people good.

It is important for us to recognise the good in our community and especially the scholars whom God has graced with intellect and training, which enables them to see things others do not see, and which as a result, causes them to sometimes make mistakes and err in their judgment and understanding.

While some of the views Dr. Lings has expressed in his insightful and brilliant writings are in contradistinction to what my own teachers taught me and what I believe, they are, however, rarified metaphysical considerations that are better pointed out as heterodoxies that fall into a category of opinion and interpretation that many of the great scholars of the past have held, including but not limited to Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Rushd, al-Farabi, Imam az-Zamakhshari, and Ibn Sina. Many of our great scholars have maintained positions based upon their idiosyncratic views and conclusions that extended beyond the boundaries of mainstream orthodoxy, but this did not prevent the community of believers from recognising their excellence and benefiting from their knowledge and piety and looking for interpretive justifications or at least excuses for them. Our scholars agreed upon matters that all Muslims could grasp as well as what was most unambiguously expressed in the Quran and Sunnah. They shied away from metaphysical considerations inaccessible to most people that also allowed for confusion or obfuscation. Imam Shatibi opined that the sacred creed and law of Islam was in essence 'illiterate' (*ummiyyah*), in which he meant accessible to the simplest of minds.

The urge to establish the universal applicability of God's mercy is rooted in the reconciliation of mercy with wrath and an acknowledgment of mercy as God's central attribute. Many scholars of the past have grappled with this theological bugbear and many still do. For instance, the well-substantiated view held by Ibn Taymiyyah, may God have mercy on him, that the Fire would eventually be extinguished was based upon his belief that the mercy of God was too vast to punish people eternally. He also based his opinions on a nuanced and highly interpretive reading of verses of the Quran that condemned some people to the hellfire eternally and substantiated his views with certain confirmed statements of the companions of the Prophet that buttressed his position. I read a book examining his views on the matter and was dumbfounded by the strength of his arguments and the subtle points he brought up on the subject. His position is, however, heterodox, and thus rejected by almost all the scholars of Islam. And while some scholars anathematised him for his views, the majority recognized it was heterodox but rooted in a sophisticated *ta'wil* (interpretation) that was nonetheless incorrect.

It is well-known that the classical and soundest view in Islam is that the Prophet's message has abrogated previous dispensations and that according to the authentic Hadith in Imam Muslim's collection anyone who is presented with a sound picture of the Prophet, in other words the Prophet's veracity as a prophet, and is substantiated for him with clear proofs, and yet still refuses to believe in him renders himself a disbeliever and suffers the consequences. And while the four schools of Sunni thought anathematise someone who does not adhere to this view, their position is based upon an outright rejection of the position and not those who use *ta'wil* to arrive at heterodox understandings without denying any meaning expressed in the Quran or the multiply-transmitted narrations of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Such views are then categorised as innovations.

However, scholars are very careful about deeming someone a disbeliever (*kafir*) who may hold heterodox beliefs as a result of *ta'wil*. And interpretive statements that have been deemed heterodox can be found in the works of Ibn 'Arabi, Sidi 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili, Emir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri, Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi and others. And despite all of those illustrious men suffering attacks from some of the great as well as less than great scholars of Islam, the community of scholars and believers alike have, notwithstanding such views, taken the good of such scholars and point out the areas of concern while adhering to the majority view where they may differ.

The Perennialist Muslims in the West constitute a highly educated cadre largely made up of converts, who have done some of the finest work on Islamic materials and have presented Islam in a beautiful and illuminating manner that has made it accessible to people it would normally not have

reached, and with an aesthetic and intellectual dimension that is sorely absent from many of the mainstream efforts. In spite of the aforementioned concerns, to dismiss their noble endeavours is unconscionable and mean-spirited.

In my subsequent meetings with Dr. Lings the issue of Perennialism did not arise nor was I inclined to mention it. My respect for his scholarship, discernable spirituality and metaphysical insights, not to mention the fact that he was more than twice my age in years and three times my age in Islam all demanded I listen attentively to his wisdom and learn from his character. He was a highly-educated Muslim who as the keeper of Oriental manuscripts at the British Museum had spent much of his adult life reading some of the finest Arabic manuscripts ever put to pen by Muslims, entirely aware of the orthodox position, and had read much finer arguments than those I would be able to muster. I chose to set aside the position I was taught and still adhere to and benefit from a unique English Muslim sage in a bereft and derelict age of folly. As Dr. Lings was a man who spoke when he had something to say and said things that resulted from intense deliberation, I took copious notes on all of my visits.

In my third and final visit to his home we largely discussed his own poetry and the nature of the poetic muse as well as the importance of poetry for the preservation of language. We ventured into some other interesting areas that are fully expounded in some of the his writings. Last year I attended an extraordinary lecture he gave on *Shakespeare and Islam* at the Globe Theatre in London. I was asked to introduce Dr. Lings and in doing so I was afforded the extraordinary opportunity to thank him publicly for being the means by which Allah had guided me to Islam; and for that I am eternally indebted to him.

He would later apologise for his physical enervation during the talk, but age, he said, was taking its toll. I was struck by the sincere humility of this man and his self-effaced character. My mother, who flew in from America, told me that she had never met anyone with such a transcendent presence as Dr. Lings. She later ordered his book on the Prophet, which I subsequently found by her bedside.

At the Globe, Dr. Lings had been signing books for some people, and when the Moroccan ambassador asked for an inscription, he changed from writing with his left hand to using his right. Apologising for the poor penmanship, he said he refused to write Arabic with his left hand out of deference to the sacred script.

On speaking with a close friend of Dr. Lings who had known him for over fifty years, I learned that the man had been an atheist and that, upon meeting Dr. Lings, had rediscovered his faith because, for the first time in his life, he felt he had met a genuinely pious man of God. He eventually embraced Islam at Dr. Lings' hand and was still close to him after several decades, with only increased admiration.

Dr. Martin Lings became Muslim in 1938, partly, he told me, because he felt that Islam was unique among the world religions in maintaining transmission in its revelation as well as in its sciences through unbroken chains that involved a "handing down," the literal meaning of tradition.

He performed the Hajj in 1939 and explained to me that his parents had helped finance his pilgrimage; he also mentioned that upon arriving by ship at the port at Jeddah from Sudan, he was asked by the ad hoc customs agents if he was Muslim. He replied that he was, and they asked him for proof. To this, he recited to them the simple creed of Islam that guarantees the right of anyone who utters it in the presence of witnesses the title Muslim, "ashahadu an La ilaha illallah, wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan ar-rasulullah!" They asked him for some more proof, at which point he looked at them and said, "What proof do you have that you are Muslim?" They let him in.



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His last public act was to celebrate the life of our beloved Prophet, peace be upon him, at Wembley Conference Center in London. Habib 'Ali and I were invited to participate as well.

Before Dr. Lings spoke he was given a highly-warranted lifetime achievement award for his dedication in spreading the message of peace and love embodied in Islam. In his short talk

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he spoke of the gift the Prophet was and of the Prophet's active engagement with his community and what a great blessing that was for us. Dr. Lings left us with the subtle thought that the Messenger is still with us. He left the hall immediately after speaking.

I knew that he must have been tired and I felt gratitude to have seen him again. I had shaken his hand and thanked him for a remarkable reflection not knowing at the time I was looking into his gentle and serene face for the last time.

My speech, which followed his, had been a result of something that he had raised in his talk. The next day, Dr. Lings, who I now called Sidi Abu Bakr, attempted to call me, and when I returned his call he assured me that he had wanted to attend my talk but was exhausted. He had called to reassure himself that I took no offense at his early departure. On the contrary, I replied, I was very happy that he could attend the conference and was deeply moved by his words. He then told me that he had not mentioned all that he had wished to say in this talk, as he feared that perhaps people would misunderstand.

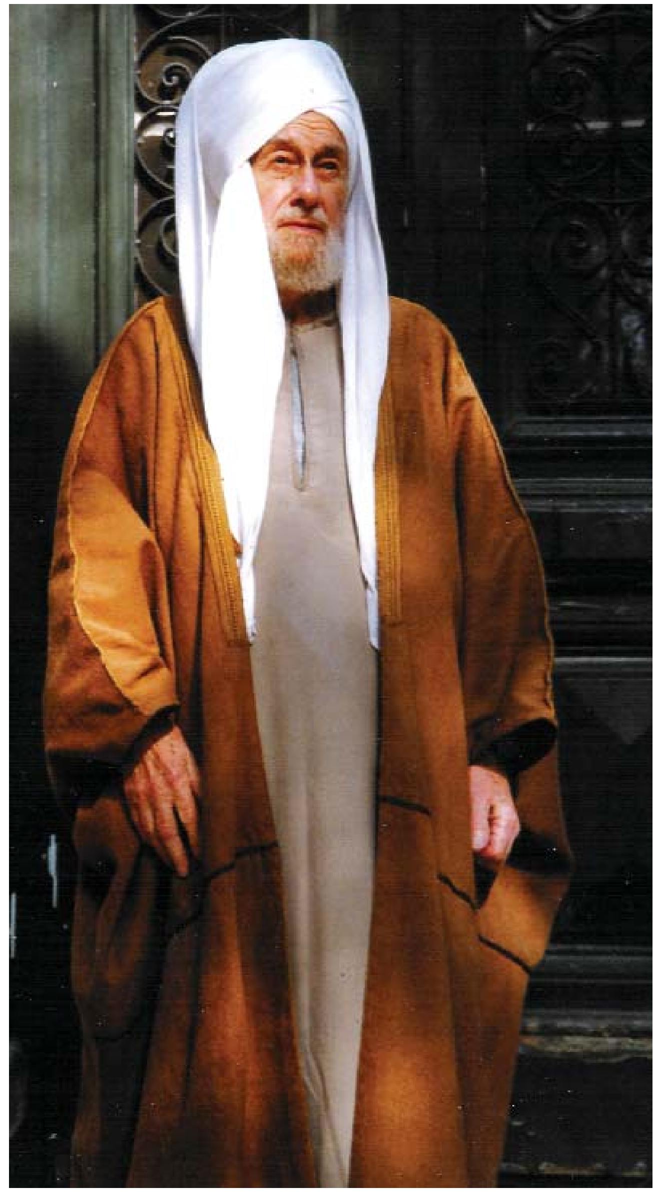
He told me that he was greatly struck by the Prophet's current involvement with his community, as Muslims around the world saw him in their dreams and derived spiritual sustenance from his vision. Moreover, he said that when writing his book, *Muhammad*, he was overwhelmed with the presence of the Prophet during the entire time and felt a great blessing in having been able to complete it.

After some time on the phone, he said, "I am so sorry for carrying on so long; please excuse me." I realised I was speaking to a man who embodied the prophetic character. I was not interested in whatever differences we might have in abstruse points of creed; I wanted only to learn from his gentle and upright character.

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Dr. Lings once told me that the problem with the modern Muslim is egocentricity, but that true Islam is Theo-centric: it puts God, not oneself, at the center of life. I believe Dr. Lings was a true Muslim, a man who put God at the center of his life and purpose.

I feel immensely honored to have known him and to have benefited from his knowledge through his books and his presence. May Allah have mercy on his soul and sanctify his secret.



Postscript: I wrote this shortly after learning of Dr. Lings' death. Returning to my home I had found a package marked "urgent." I asked my wife when it had arrived, and she informed me that it came today. I opened it and found, to my utter surprise, a pre-publication copy of Dr. Lings' final book, that I had not even known he had written, entitled, *A Return to the Spirit*. On the inside of the cover-piece was this message: "Dr. Lings requested you by name to write something for the back of the book!"

sat down and read the short book without being able to put it down, as it was an extended exposition on the very topics we had discussed in our meetings. Upon finishing, I felt as if I had received a wonderful personal letter from a man who was the means by which I was guided and who I had come to love for the sake of God. While I believe in some ways that event was a *karamah* from God at the hands of the Sidi Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din. His real *karamah* was his impeccable character, piety and uprightness of action in all aspects of his life. May God shower him with His grace and mercy. ■